

The Heart Of John Muir's World

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For my presentation I draw on John Muir's lifetime correspondence with his family from young manhood onward. The letters provide insight into the heart of this man and show that family support and affection were essential to him and his work. Although they were separated by many miles, their concern and interest sustained him and gave him a sense of personal security. John, in turn, cared about the welfare of his sisters and brothers, and later, in his role as older brother, gave them advice and practical help. Also, he was particularly concerned about the welfare of his mother Anne.

I expand on Muir's youthful experiences on two pioneer Marquette County, Wisconsin farms and the inspiration he received as he explored the beautiful and diverse countryside, especially around the first one at Fountain Lake. In 1864, when Muir was almost twenty-six years old and about to set out for Canada, he attempted to preserve a portion of the farm for its beauty alone. This first preservation effort was the seed that germinated in his heart and mind and grew into the formation of the National Park System.

I cover the years preceding Muir's travel to California in 1868, including his hard-working and adventurous farm years. In his passion for learning he developed intellectual skills as he taught himself from books; his inventive and creative talents unfolded when he whittled unique inventions out of hickory; in correspondence with young farm friends he showed a zest for life and ideas despite long hours of hard farm work and the harshness of his father; and there were the close relationships with the other family members and the influence of the people around him.

There were important turning points in his life--showing inventions at the state fair in Madison; his sojourn at Prairie du Chien; intermittent attendance at Wisconsin University; working at the broom and rake handle factory in Canada; and working at the carriage wheel parts factory in Indianapolis. Letters give vivid glimpses into his life during these years.

His personal horizons widened and eventually he was led to his career in California preaching nature like an apostle and his mission to protect natural landscapes.

"When I was a boy in Scotland," Muir wrote in his autobiography, "I was fond of everything wild and all my life I've been growing fonder and fonder of wild places and wild creatures."

I give some focus to Muir's childhood in Scotland. When I recently journeyed to his birthplace in Dunbar on the North Sea I was impressed with the centuries of historical, cultural, and personal heritage represented there--the heritage Muir brought to America.

In recent years the principles inspired by John Muir are coming full circle as the world conservation leader is given his rightful place in his native land. Dunbar's John Muir Association has made great strides in researching and sharing details of his background and sites of his early childhood by the North Sea. The United Kingdom's John Muir Trust, formed in 1983, has been buying and managing thousands of acres of wild lands. Like their counterparts in the United States who have worked for many years to conserve the national landscape, they too are putting Muir's inspired message to work in behalf of wild places.

Note: Much of this material is developed in my book, *The Heart of John Muir's World*.